

Culture, Identity, and Social Capital in Building Resilient Communities in

Nigeria's Niger Delta, 20th -21st Centuries

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Abstract

The study examines culture, identity and social capital in building resilient communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta from the 20th to the 21st centuries. Apart from oil and gas resources, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, is rich in culture and heritage but over the years its collective value and importance have not been realized. This is mainly because of the various environmental challenges due to oil exploration activities, social disruption, neglect and criminality. The study will look at the interconnectedness of culture, identity and social capital in sustaining economic and social development within Nigeria's Delta region. It will explore how social capital, kinship, socio-economic and other factors have reciprocal relationships in bringing communities together and fostering their holistic well-being and peaceful coexistence. It will also interrogate cultural values and social capital as a critical driving force to the flourishing of the communities. The role of rituals in building communities' resilience will also be explored. The study will be limited to colonial and post-colonial periods in the Niger Delta region. The research aims to contribute to sustainable peace and inclusive growth and development in the region. The study adopts a qualitative approach, using primary and secondary sources. It concludes that resilience cannot be achieved solely on institutions and political reforms but is rooted in cultural identity and necessitates engagement with the lived realities of culture, identity, economic and social capital in the Niger Delta region.

Introduction

20th and 21st centuries have demonstrated that culture, identity and social capital are fundamental to any community resilience in the Niger Delta region. The Niger Delta states include Cross River, Akwa-Ibom Delta Edo, Bayelsa, Ondo, Rivers is rich with the natural resources and socially diverse. The culture, identity and social capital are built in a centralized way on how different communities in Nigerian's Niger Delta have been able to navigate the challenges right from the early 20th century to the 21st century. Culture reflects the identity, history and values of a people. Before the discovery of oil, the Niger Delta region was replete with rich mangrove, riverine forest, waterways, and settlements that over the years have lived and supported each other's ethnic nationalities such as the Efik, Boki, Ogoni, Ijaw, Ibibio, Itsekiri, Urhobo, and the Anioma among others. These groups historically have depended on farming fishing, hunting and trading (Talbot, 2001, 276-279). This region was popularly known to produce palm oil and other commodities. Upon the arrival of the Europeans and

because of the usefulness of palm oil the colonialists incorporated it into the global commodity for export. The discovery of crude oil also increased the prominence of the Niger Delta region in the global market in the post-colonial era with militarization, centralization and multinational exploration which profoundly reconfigured the social life of the indigenous people. In the post-colonial era that was marked with criminality, violence, environmental degradation, conflicts, economic instability, political instability, unproductive cultural challenges and distrust remained key resources for resilience as a way to disrupt and transformed core social functions in the aspiration of growth and development of the region (Anene, 1965, 308-309).

Culture often described as the cradle of humanity is a home of the richest and the most diverse cultural heritage in the world. In the Niger Delta culture is a living repertoire of language, moral, norms, and rituals. Niger Delta has secret societies, age groups, fish cooperatives, indigenous traditional institutions and religious beliefs provided specific rules of reciprocity and traditional

medicines (Balogun, 2018, 55-59). There have been change and continuity both negative and the positive in various aspects of life in the Niger Delta. During the colonial period indirect rule system, missionaries and Islamic religion, urbanization, and post-civil war reshaped and altered the culture. The missionaries and Islamic revivals reanimated moral vision and created a welfare infrastructure to the people that also altered their way of life. As time went on, with the exploration of oil, modernity became more pronounced, with self-realization, crisis, struggles for resource control, agitation for compensation and development. Identity is an ethic belonging, citizenship, occupation, affiliation and access to resources voice. In the Niger Delta region, different communities are known by their different identity either by language or dressing among others. It is important to note that the women's groups have leveraged material and moral authority to broker peace and maintain household food security (Aziza, 1998, 749-750)

Social capital in the Niger Delta is creating networks, trust, relations and group cooperation for mutual benefit. It brings the community or society together and gives the

needed strength for cohesion especially in collective actions. Social capital in the Niger Delta is embedded in kinship, age groups, communal ties, cooperative system, village union, extended families. The Niger Delta region because of oil exploration identity politics has underpinned claims and representation while the people (John, 2025) are facing ecological challenges. The social capital enables coordination in bonding bridges in linking forms within the region. It also bonded ties within kinship, ethnic and faith which helped in the rapid mobilization during crises such as flooding, and pipeline explosions which helped in sustaining risk-sharing and labor exchange (Benjamin & Elliot, 2025, 89-97). Bridging ties connect heterogeneous different groups around the villages or towns and occupation lines for trade or business purposes. It helps in building peace across corridors among communities. It also links ties to external institutions, non-governmental agencies, local governments and corporate social responsibilities. These links often determine if the external interventions reinforce dependency or catalyze inclusive and locally owned resilience (Njoku, 2001, 29-32).

Right from the 20th century, a lot of challenges began to occur specially the loss of the mangrove vegetation, pollution, climate change, oil spillage and gas flaring have tested community resilience. During this period of challenges only little support was gotten from external support. Most relief materials distributed were never enough for the people. Some of the relief materials are gotten from free will donation, from non-governmental organizations, government and united nations. In this digital age, WhatsApp platforms, radio, television, and education have expanded the reach of social capital to the people for rapid information dissemination (Sibiri, 2010). This has aided information sharing across communities in times of emergencies. The social fabric in the region has had challenges of monetized politics and patronage and some of the customary authority, compensation from the multination's has fueled intra-community competition and triggered protests that could fracture the trust of the people (Rudolph, 2011, 222-238).

Migration and urbanization can redistribute social capital, and most times can lead to weakness of village group association, because most people may be moving to the

towns such as Calabar, Warri, Asaba, Uyo, Ogoja, Port-Harcourt, because of opportunities in the cities. The insecurity in the region has reduced the economic productivity, complicating the occupation and the livelihood of the people leading to unemployment and criminality. It has also threatened intergenerational compacts that underpinned indigenous labor and apprenticeship system in the various communities. It is important to anchor in resilience theory and political ecology and is driven to postcolonial state formation. This study intends to show how cultural repertoires; identity formation and social capital interact to really produce both resilience and vulnerability. It argues that durable resilience in the region could be less a technical outcome of the project than a social-ecology development. It has shown that communities live in inherited culture and there are also transformative innovations. The work will however trace the change and continuity in the Niger Delta region and showcase that in building resilient communities it will require recognizing the culture as a tool and identity as a dynamic basis for inclusive citizenship and social capital as infrastructure. Measures should be

put in place such as ecological remediation, peace and co-existence that amplifies communities' inter-relationship. The culture is the foundation of unity, identity and the progress of a people, it promotes and ensures that the Niger Delta remain rooted in its heritage while battling with cultural modernity (Sulaiman, 2016, 70-71).

Methodology:

The study employs a multidisciplinary research approach. The methodology integrates historical analysis with a focus on culture, identity, and social capital in building resilient Communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta, 20th -21st Centuries. The methodology integrates historical analysis with qualitative research techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Primary sources with the use of interviews and secondary sources were employed. Secondary sources were based on the use of text books; government reports and other relevant materials will be used. These sources offer insights into official narratives and responses to indigenous communities to culture. The study conducts structured and semi-structured interviews with individuals and community chiefs. By combining historical inquiry with qualitative methods,

this study gave an insight on the cultural identity of the Niger Delta region between the 20th and the 21st centuries and indigenous knowledge, and cultural practices in the region.

Discussion

Culture and Community Resilience in the Niger Delta.

It has been noted that the Niger delta region is the most culturally diverse with rich mineral resources in West Africa. It has numerous ethnic nationalities and each of these ethnic groups is distinctive with numerous languages, traditions and customs (Aziza, 749). The region is endowed with crude oil and gas in abundance but affected with ecological degradation, conflicts, poverty in the face of abundance. In the face of these challenges, culture is the major pillar in keeping communities together. People of the Niger Delta are marginalized but have adapted and thrived despite the adversity in the region (Akanie, 2012, 17-20).

It is pertinent to note that culture encompasses values, norms and traditions where people practice sharpening how to respond to crises. Historically, the cultural institutions and social networks create stability and solidarity in coping with

difficulty challenges with their neighbors (Agba, Ikoh Ushie, 2013, 130-136). Some of the coping strategies include the following;

It was by putting in place chieftaincy structure. Governance and traditional institutions in the Niger Delta region: it is important to note that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is not only a hub of economic importance, but it is also a space where governance is involved and deeply interwoven with indigenous traditional systems (Woodcock & Narayan, 2000, 226). During the pre-colonial period, traditional institutions played a significant role in regulating communities by safeguarding cultural values, restoring peace, life, resolving disputes, and helping in social cohesion in different communities (Alagoa, 1980, 56-57). During the colonial era, the colonial masters disrupted some of the existing culture, but these institutions remain vital and influential in local politics, development trajectories and identity. The indigenous people of the Niger Delta emphasized kinship chieftaincy, age grades, council of elders and women leaders. Decisions were taken collectively in town halls. In the region trade also enhanced

relationships and cooperation among the communities (Dike, 1956, 89-90).

Colonial impact on traditional institutions; During the colonial period the colonial masters built their authority on the existing traditional authority (Afigbo, 1977 468-479). The policy of indirect rule restructured governance by promoting some chiefs to the warrant chiefs. The imposition of colonial rule disrupted the indigenous social structure putting tensions between the colonial-imposed chiefs to the detriment of the indigenous chiefs. The colonial system weakened the traditional system and promoted new hierarches (Udayangani, 2010, 305-312).

The post-colonial and state structure: after Nigeria got its independence, the Niger Delta government became dominant in the state institutions, by the creation of the Local government councils, state assemblies and the federal government. Because of the oil in the region, political marginalization, environmental degradation often created a governance gap with the state institutions deep into corruption and being distanced from the local institutions (Okon, 2022, 542-561). In this instance, the traditional institutions regained its importance and

became custodians of communal land and settling of disputes and advocating peace and development in the communities. There are many functions the traditional rulers play in the contemporary governance, conflict resolution, cultural heritage, moral authority and settling of disputes among others (Bates, 2020, 198-207).

Festivals, ritual and collective Identity:

In the Niger Delta region, there are different cultural festivals such as Boki new yam festivals, masquerades, canoe regattas and many other festivals that are celebrated across the Niger Delta to strengthen cultural identity. In the process of celebration, there will always be communal inter-group relationship and solidarity. The region is known for being culturally diverse despite the challenges of oil exploration and environmental degradation. The people of the Niger Delta region have continued to celebrate different festivals and their cultural practices, in the process of celebrating festivals and rituals serve as power tools for social cohesion in Africa as a whole (Berardi, 2021, 125-136).

Festivals in the Niger Delta Region: in the Niger Delta region festivals are more than celebrations, but are associated with

spirituality, heritage, social identity and the way of life of the people. It is also embedded with traditions. It also serves as an avenue for community cohesion; cultural expression and it also led to socio-economic interaction among communities. The festivals are often marked by masquerade displays, dance, music and celebrations. This study will examine few different types of festivals in the Niger Delta region (Afigbo 468-469).

New Yam Festivals: It is pertinent to note that, the Niger Delta region's terrain is divided into two, the hinterlands and the coastal areas. The hinterland areas often celebrate new yam festivals because of the rich yam harvest, while some of the coastal areas celebrate the boat regatta and some by swimming competitions. Boat regatta is a significant festival celebration by the riverain people most specially people from Rivers State, Bayelsa state, Cross River state and Akwa-Ibom state. It is rooted in the culture and traditions of the people. This is a period to honor their cultural heritage which helps in connecting the ancestors to the people and fostering unity among the people (Alagoa, 255-257). During the festive periods, different meals are prepared in large quantities and visitors are received and

entertained. People are always excited and filled with happiness at such festivals. Boat paddling performance are exhibited by each of the boat's occupants and at this time the chiefs, elders and the entire people are allowed to watch and decide the winners. This festival serves as a means of protection to the people and the water. The boat regatta festival comes in as competition among the people (Group interview). Before the festival, the competitors take their time to clean polish and decorate their boats with different colors for the competition, and the winners are always honored. The people of Ekpe, Ijaw, Isoko, Ogoni, Kalabari and Igbani communities care for their boats and keep them in perfect working condition mostly for the festival. It is important to note that this ceremony is celebrated when there is a high tide in the rivers and it is celebrated during the raining season. The Efik people of cross river state celebrate boat regatta once per year (Bassey, 2025).

As it often said, festivals are the central aspect of community life. Boki new yam

festival is celebrated every 18th of August on a yearly basis. The new yam festival marks the agricultural cycles, and it also commemorates historical events and transmit values from generations to generations (Odeigah, 2019, 345-353).

Masquerade festival:

masquerade festival is regarded as an embodiment of the ancestral spirits that communicate between the ancestors and the spirits. Masquerades are generally believed to be manifestation of the spirits, deities and it is also believed that they only appear during festivals. In the region, there is the Ekine masquerade of Kalabari in Rivers state and Ekpe society in Cross River state. These festivals showcase different types of masquerades with different dance styles to entertain the people, and it occupies a central place in the cultural and Spiritual life of the people. Urobo, Efik, Boki, Ogoni, Ibibio, and Ugep among others are rich in varied masquerade traditions, and most of these mostly reflect valued cosmology (Abang, 2025).



Picture showing Atam Masquerade in Boki area of Niger Delta

Most of the masquerades appeared during the funeral of their members or the king of the town as well as at initiation ceremonies or other rituals within their membership. The Urhobos and the Ijaws regard masquerades as messengers of the ancestors and that they come into their midst to either bless, warn, guide or direct the people. In the process of the masquerades appearing, it is most times accompanied with its members drumming and chanting traditional songs. Masquerades also provide entertainment using dramatic performances to keep people happy and engaged (Agbor, 2025).

The masquerades are very important to the people because it can serve as an agent of discipline, enforcing laws, punishing offenders and directing people to conform with their

rules and regulations. The costumes of the masquerades are most time elaborate, featuring raffia, animal skins, feathers, colorful fabrics among other adornments. The costumes significantly symbolize spiritual transformation and the dance styles are equally diverse and inclusive. In the Niger Delta region, the various communities have their different masquerades (Odeigah, 346-347)

In places like the Ibibio and Efik land there are elaborate masquerade societies functioning in both political and spiritual domains, occasionally as secret societies that wield enormous power and authority. The Ekpe society is traditionally a governing body responsible for enforcing the laws, settling of disputes, and maintenance of

social order within the villages and communities. For instance, Ekpe society or Mgbe society are mostly organized and found in cross river state, and its paramount responsibility is for the administration of the organization and governance in the communities. One of the major symbols of the Ekpe is Nsibidi which is an ancient form of script written and formulated by the members of Ekpe society. It is important to note that Nsibidi writing is an important concept that goes beyond just the scripts, it is an operational symbol and a platform for communication among members of that society (Etim,2025). Ekpe masquerade is known as a representative of the spirit of their great ancestors. Ekpe masquerade festival holds in Cross River State of Nigeria, and it has a rich historical and cultural depth and significance among the people (Nwaobi, 2025). Ijaw masquerades such as Owu and Egbesu, are masquerades that are specifically associated with water spirits because of their nearness to the waters. This people were born groomed and live in the riverine environment. The Urhobo masquerade such as Ohworu is greatly feared and respected by the people because is believed to be an

embodiment of their great ancestral spirits that appear only during their yearly festival.

In the 21st century masquerades are not only associated with traditions and religion, but it has become a part of cultural tourism with all the associated economic and social benefits because of various reforms and refinements. Places such as Calabar, and Boki among others are beginning to turn cultural festivals to carnivals, and international event. In the modern context, people travel far and near to celebrate their cultural heritage. However, masquerades as a symbol of spirituality, culture, art and community life, enforce social norms, and express the rich cultural tradition of the people (Bassey, 2025).

Fish festival: Fishing is one of the oldest and vital occupation in the Niger Delta region. it is also a crucial source of food, livelihood and cultural expression to the people. The region had an extensive network of lakes, rivers and creeks that linked Atlantic Ocean (Faluyi, 1998, 20-23). This festival is one of the most important cultural festivals in the region, and it reflects the deep and cherished connection between the ancestors and their aquatic environment. The coastal area is characterized by the rivers, creeks and mangrove forest among others. Many

communities dwell in the riverain areas because most of these communities have their major occupation as fishing (Dike,1956, 89-90). Fishing as an economic activity, it is also an embodiment of the people's traditional and spiritual identity. This tradition is also rooted from their age-old culture, which over the years has been passing from one generation to the other. Most communities celebrate during the beginning of the fishing season to really have bountiful harvests and to appreciate the gods and goddesses whom it is believed are in

control of the seas and the waters and for giving the people adequate protection during the fishing season (Emmanuel, Ebibotei, & Amah, 2024, 331-334). This occasion is accompanied with libations and pouring of hot drinks, palm wine and other sacrifices to appease the gods. There are also dances, songs and in most cases, masquerades also appear for the display of their age-long traditions. There is always a high level of excitement during these festive periods (Ifedior, 2002, 663).



Picture of Palm wine often used for pouring of libation to the gods

This process is to reinforce communal unity and ancestral reverence. Most times individuals in the process and man and women gather beside the rivers to do competitions and merriments with traditional

tools such as nets, baskets, fish traps, canoes and this is to showcase who will catch the biggest fish. This also demonstrates the strength, courage and fame of the winner who is seen as a hero or heroine, and most times

are given traditional titles and gifts (Ndom, 2025). These celebrations are not only festivals, but it is also a time of social interactions, socializing with neighbors and it strengthens kinship, trade and unity. Over the years festive periods have become a period of economic activities where people generate revenue by buying and selling of products (Fegbo, 2020, 115-123). Most youths will display their talents, creativity, products and create relationships. Tourism and modern *Boki* new yam festival have gained great prominence be the young people who travel far and near to celebrate. The festival has also attracted scholars and researchers because of its economic and social significance in the Niger Delta region. The people have preserved their heritage and created new opportunities for growth, resilience, development, economic empowerment (Odeigah, 2018, 114-120)

Religious and traditional festivals: The traditional festivals serve as an avenue of worship and cultural expression but also as a way of bringing unity among the diverse groups in the Niger Delta region. Most times traditional religious beliefs, worship of the ancestral spirits is an important part of all the festivals in the communities. The *Ekpe*

society is dated back to the pre-colonial era, and its major function was that it was used as an institution of governance. It operated in hierarchy inferring spiritual, prestige, power and high authority. *Ekpe* festival is mostly celebrated in Calabar and among the Ibibio. This festival is associated with the *Ekpe* secret society which involves drumming and masquerades performances (Gbeneyne, 2018, 37-42). It is also known as *Mgbe* within some groups and is one of the most powerful institutions among the Efik in Cross River State and the Ibibio in Akwa-Ibom state of Nigeria. It is a cultural and political institution with spiritual and social significance in the area. The *Ekpe* is not just a cultural institution and custodian of tradition but also serves as a spirit. It also governs the Efiks and before now, regulated trade and settled disputes. It has become a symbol of Efik identity, heritage and tradition (Nwaobi, 2025).

Building Resilience in communities in the 20th and 21st centuries in the Niger Delta Region.

The Niger Delta with abundant natural resources has become a paradox of deprivation and poverty. Even though the resources from the Niger Delta have

contributed enormously to the national economy, the people in a way were gripped in the anguish of ecological degradation, marginalization and political instability. However, the people have continuously and conscientiously demonstrated reliance by working hard for the development of their various communities, local governments and states. In building a resilient region, this encompassed social capital, strengthening traditions, great cultural identity and adapting methods for the people to cope with the different challenges such as ecological degradation, criminality, kidnapping, social unrest and political violence. Over the years the region has navigated through colonial and presently post-colonial transition. The people also navigated through missionary influences and making efforts to sustain their occupation in fishing and farming among other vocations (Agbor).

The people built their culture and identity through indigenous cultural practices, language, festivals and kinship system and this has continued to foster solidarity and collective actions to keep the region going. The traditional institutions have also played very vital roles in adding beauty to the system, such as settling of disputes, conflict

resolutions, persevering of their cultural heritage and leadership. In the area of social capital, women groups were formed, age groups, youth's organizations emerged to showcase various platforms for grass root mobilization for progress and to resist external forces and negative influences. The youths are also moving forward in adapting to new innovations to foster growth and development both in the urban and rural communities in the region. Furthermore, religion and traditional the belief system has contributed to their resilience by giving moral support and spiritual guidance (Ekon, 2025).

Over the years, advocacy have become a central tool for sustainable development because of the activism of the youth. At different times different groups protests have also remained a vital tool for safeguarding culture and welfare for the people. Non-governmental organizations have offered sustenance through empowerment programmes and capacity building training among the youths and digital education transformation has opened a new gateway for resilience by giving opportunities for the voice of the people to be heard through digital platforms.

Recommendations

1. Festivals, ritual and collective Identity should be promoted to foster unity among the communities.
2. The communities should preserve and promote their cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge system, language, oral traditions and all expressions as a vital asset for resilience. Festival
3. It is also important for Non-governmental Organization, media, and government to promote and support cultural institutions, archival documents and local practice into growth and development of the region and Nigeria as a hold.
4. Cultural exchange should be encouraged among the different communities to reduce identity-based tensions.
5. Cultural education should be inculcated into the educational curriculum; this will help to promote national unity.
6. Digital platforms should be use for serious participation of cultural leadership and, unity and to foster identity building.
7. Policy makers should make laws to integrate cultural perspectives into resilience.
8. Cultural industries such as crafts, and tourism should be organized to encourage

economic empowerment and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the resilience of the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria reflects their ingenuity and ascertainment of the people to sustain their livelihoods. The interwoven dynamics of culture, identity and social capital has become clear that these elements remain a crucial tool of community resilience in the Niger Delta region. This has shown a framework for their collective adaptation in the face of challenges and disruption by their still living together, in solidary, asserting their rights and maintaining social cohesion and protection of their cherished heritage. Despite the pressure of globalization and digital technology, resource exploration, the exploration of social capital anchored in tradition, kinship ties, community network, cooperation, trust and collective action in addressing issues have fostered survival and the gateway for sustainable growth and development in the region. The resilience of the people is not only on external interventions but is deeply rooted in the enduring capacity of the people put together in their inherited tradition, social

capital, cultural wealth, their identity and above all, securing a more profound flourishing future for growth and development.

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